



PRESS RELEASE

House Armed Services Committee

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OPENING STATEMENT OF CHAIRMAN FLOYD D. SPENCE AT HEARING ON U.S. FORCE POSTURE WITH REGIONAL COMMANDERS

Today the committee continues its examination of the Administration's Fiscal Year 2000 defense budget request and the impact it will have on U.S. policy, strategy, and military operations in the Asia-Pacific region.

We are joined by two senior officers whose areas of responsibility, in geographic and demographic terms, encompass about half of the world's surface and more than half of the world's population. In political terms, their area of responsibility encompasses the last bastions of communism, including what is certainly one of the most dangerous regimes on earth.

Our witnesses today are:

- Admiral Dennis C. Blair, the new Commander-in-Chief of the U.S. Pacific Command; and
- General John H. Tilelli, Commander-in-Chief of United States Forces Korea.

Gentlemen, welcome. And Admiral Blair, congratulations on your new job.

Headline writers may be devoting most of their attention to the crises in Iraq and the Balkans, but I believe that the economic, political, and military situation in Asia and the Pacific is one of the most volatile in the world today.

Looming largest on the horizon is China. It is no exaggeration to state that the rise of China will be the most significant security issue of the coming century. The Administration's China policy is one of "engagement," with emphasis on commercial concerns. Indeed, last year President Clinton expressed his desire to make China a "strategic partner" of the United States, a goal reiterated by Secretary of State Albright during her visit to China this week.

But given the pattern of recent events, the question of how best to "engage" with China is increasingly open. Every year seems to produce, if not an actual crisis with China, then some significant growth in China's military strength that places U.S. allies and forces and, indeed, the United States itself, more at risk.

Simply stated, China is increasingly in competition with the United States and will continue to challenge U.S. security interests. In fact, according to a recent DOD report commissioned by this Committee, "The

Chinese realize...that attaining recognition as the preeminent political power in Asia will require the weakening of U.S...influence in the region.” In my judgment, this is not the basis for a meaningful partnership.

If the question of China is the most important long-term security issue in Asia, then the problem of North Korea is perhaps the most pressing short-term crisis. Despite repeated attempts to “engage” North Korea, the Agreed Framework is dead and the regime appears more interested in playing a dangerous game of nuclear blackmail with the United States.

I remain deeply concerned about the threat North Korean forces pose to our troops and our friends on the Korean peninsula. With the deployment of the No Dong missile last year, North Korean aspirations to enhance its regional influence were evident. This past summer, the situation took a turn for the worse. North Korea launched the Taepo Dong-1, a missile with the range to hit targets in the United States, and is expected to test the Taepo Dong-2, another ICBM-class missile, later this year.

While the challenges to U.S. leadership in Asia mount, our ability to respond to these threats is increasingly in doubt. Over the past year, the Joint Chiefs of Staff have judged that the ability of U.S. forces to execute the missions called for in the National Military Strategy involve “moderate to high risk.” This does not bode well for the United States’ long-term ability to protect and promote our national interests in a large and critical region of the world.

Our witnesses today, both highly seasoned professionals, are charged with managing these high risks. Admiral Blair must help to shape our response to China, an emerging great power in Asia, while General Tilelli must be ready to respond in an instant to crises in Korea. As forces are increasingly diverted from the Pacific theater to the Persian Gulf and elsewhere, the risks grow. I hope our witnesses will address the issue of risk as directly as possible in this morning’s hearing.

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